Encouraging First Year Student Engagement through a Group 'YouTube' Video Assessment

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Introduction

In 2008-09, London Metropolitan Business School introduced a new suite of Business and Management degrees to replace some existing courses. A main aim of the teaching and learning strategy for the first year is to 'engage students in their studies; provide ongoing feedback, raise their aspirations and motivation to study' (London Metropolitan University, 2008:10). This paper looks specifically at the video based group assessment which is part of the Global Challenges module. It reviews the assessment in light of feedback from students and the academic literature and considers whether is it is an effective means of fostering student engagement. Whilst recognising that engaging students requires a holistic approach, the paper considers how one specific assessment activity contributes to that holistic experience.

Dimensions of Student Engagement

Student Engagement, 'focuses on the extent to which students are engaging in activities that higher education research has shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes' (Kruse & Coates, 2008:493). The literature provides a wealth of engagement principles against which to review the Global Challenges module. Frequently cited dimensions of student engagement are collaboration between students; good interaction between students and faculty and encouraging student involvement through active and collaborative learning approaches (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Tinto, 2009; Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2003; Krause & Coates, 2008; Nicol, 2009). Additionally, setting high and challenging expectations is a recurring theme (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Tinto, 2009; Krause & Coates, 2008 & Kuh, 2003).

The Contentious Issue of Assessed Group Work

Whilst the student engagement literature emphasises the importance of peer relationships and collaborative working, there is still much contention around group-work based assessment. Guidelines on assessment issued in New Zealand (Victoria

University of Wellington, 2004:6) argue that consideration needs to be given to the volume of group work across a course. It states that, 'too great an emphasis on group work, particularly in assessment, drew criticism despite the fact that many graduates commented that they had learnt important team work skills'. Lejk & Wyvill's survey (1994) of undergraduate computing courses found support for group working but much more cautious and uncertain attitudes regarding the reliability of group assessment.

A logical compromise might be to encourage group collaborative working but not to link it to assessment. However, Lejk & Wyvill (1994:84) note that, 'if the group's product is not assessed, there is no incentive to take the group work seriously and some students may well opt out in order to concentrate on their assessments'. Assessment is arguably the most powerful tool in the pedagogical toolbox. As Brown et al (1997:7) remark, 'assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time'.

Some of the elements of Chickering & Gamson's (1987) seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education are reiterated in the best practice literature on assessment, for example, giving students sufficient time to work on tasks (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Nicol, 2009; Victoria University of Wellington, 2004) and giving prompt feedback (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Tinto, 2009; Nicol, 2009; Victoria University of Wellington, 2004). Additionally, the literature on assessment and group work brings to the fore the issue of validity and reliability and especially fairness (Nicol, 2009; Nordberg, 2008; Lejk & Wyvill, 1997; Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Brown et al, 1997; Victoria University of Wellington, 2004). Part of the solution to this problem is to ensure students receive clear and consistent messages regarding the purpose; requirements and assessment criteria for the group work (Tinto, 2009; Nicol, 2009; Victoria University of Wellington, 2004).

From the literature, it seems clear that group work can help to foster student engagement, particularly in the first semester and first year when students are seeking to establish friendship groups. However, assessment of group work is a complex and emotive area. The case that follows reviews an example of assessed group work and considers whether it fosters or hinders student engagement.

The Global Challenges Experience

Global Challenges is a core module in the first semester of the first year of undergraduate study which develops an appreciation of the multi-faceted nature of management and relates management theory to contemporary issues such as sustainability.

Classroom time consists of twelve, two-hour workshops, in classes of approximately twenty students. There is a mix of both taught content and participative activities

and group work. Each class has a dedicated lecturer. There were over 600 students on the first run of the module and a teaching team of fourteen different lecturers, - a considerable group work challenge in itself. Students worked in small groups of about four people to develop a five minute video. The topic of the video was a boardroom briefing considering the impact of one of five global challenges on a given company e.g. Globalisation and HSBC bank or Corporate Social Responsibility and Imperial Tobacco. The actual making of the video was largely under the students' own control and there was limited technical assistance. Students were given some time in class to work in their groups and consult with the lecturer, but were also expected to meet outside the classroom. The video was recorded on students' own equipment, such as mobile phone or digital camera, and then uploaded to the video sharing website, YouTube.

The video carried 30% of the marks for the module with an individual written paper carrying a further 70%. The students received a single mark per group which was then moderated up or down if it was clear from the contribution log and further discussions that a student had significantly over or under contributed relative to the rest of the group.

Data Collection and Discussion

A student feedback form was distributed at the start of the very first event that took place to assess the videos. There was a large audience of about 100 students who were taught by four different lecturers. Fifty forms were handed out among the audience by one of the students. Twenty four forms were handed in at the end of the event. The students were asked three questions concerning what they had most and least enjoyed about the video assessment and what they felt they had learnt. Each student could make more than one comment under each question so the data includes multiple responses for each person. The responses from the twenty four feedback sheets were collated into common categories and each student identified by a letter from A to X. It is a small sample but it provided some interesting and insightful anecdotal comments. Resources are being sought to conduct a much more rigorous analysis of the entire first year of the new degree programmes.

Planning and making the video was cited most frequently as the aspect that students most enjoyed about the assessment. When items relating to the video, such as researching and filming, were included then seventeen individual students commented positively. Typical positive comments included student E: *'it was a new experience in my life and it was quite interesting. Instead of a presentation in front of everyone...we made the video and it is exactly the same but much better';* or student U: *'I enjoyed making the video using iMovie as it was very easy and provided a great result'.* Group working was also positively cited by over a third of students. Typical comments came from student H: *'I enjoyed it a lot. It was great to work as a team'* and S: *'team commitment, effort, team willingness to do their part'.*

Considering the aspects of the module that students least enjoyed, group work featured at the top of the list. Comments included student L: *'the fact that the group never actually became a team….equal amount of effort was not received by everyone'* and student N: *'I find it really tiring getting hold of my team members. Like they were children';* and student D: *'not everybody put in the same effort to complete the task'* and again from student D: *'my work was not appreciated by the team'.* The video form of assessment received some criticism but it was generally quite specific. Only two students just stated: *'the video'.*

When commenting on what they had learnt from the module, the clear lead, with fifteen out of twenty-four responses, was *'group working'.* Aspects of project work such as time management and planning were also cited. The comments about group work suggested difficulties with meeting and with everyone contributing equally. Student M learnt that *'I should voice my opinion more strongly instead of keeping quiet for the sake of group harmony';* and student J commented that *'working together is not easy as everyone has other things going on.'* Student B stated more critically: *'don't work in a team with people who are not committed'.*

Out of twenty-four respondents, twenty students commented on some aspect of group work. It was the first or second most frequently stated item for each of the three questions. This suggests that group work is very effective and liked when it works well and the cause of a lot of consternation and misery when it does not.

It is worth noting that, whilst an analysis of completion rates and grades is not provided here, the significant majority of students did manage to complete the video and upload it to YouTube. In later semesters, the videos were just shown within the students' small teaching group of twenty, and not organised as larger events.

Further Analysis and Conclusions

It seems from the feedback that students found the assessment interesting and challenging. They seemed to enjoy researching and making the video and learnt from the experience. However, video-based assessment combines the complexity of managing group work with the added complexity of a technology which is not as widely used and understood as, for example, PowerPoint. It has tremendous potential as it meets many of the key drivers of engagement cited in the literature such as collaboration between students, good interaction between students and faculty and encouraging student involvement through active and collaborative learning approaches. It also sets high and challenging expectations of students.

A key strength of the way the assessment is managed at present seems to be the use of the two-hour workshop format which allows for small class sizes and a dedicated lecturer. It enables students and faculty to get to know each other and for students

to work on collaborative activities in class as well as outside. It allows faculty to provide regular feedback and enables any group issues to be identified.

The aspect that appeared top or second on all three student questions categories was group working. This seems to support the view from the literature that group working can help people to integrate both socially and academically, particularly students who are commencing their studies, but that it can also be fraught with tension and highly emotive. The Global Challenges video-based assessment has strong potential to foster student engagement, but only if it is managed with a clear understanding and consideration of the drivers of effective group-assessment. As Nordberg (2008:482) argues, it is a difficult thing to get right due to the, 'sheer number of dimensions of the problem'. Focussing on learning from best practice in managing assessed group work is likely to reap the greatest rewards in terms of fostering and facilitating student engagement through the Global Challenges module. Nicol (2009) and Victoria University of Wellington (2004) have developed useful guidelines that are specific to both group assessment and effective student engagement. This includes ensuring clarity of purpose and requirements; opportunities to work in groups in class; timely feedback; marking criteria that encourages group work and careful consideration of fairness.

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Biographical note

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